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SUBJECT: ZAMBIAN PRESIDENTIAL RACE TIGHTENS

¶1. (SBU) Summary. New polling data suggest that opposition leader Michael Sata has nudged ahead in the Zambian presidential race. The poll, however, is based on a relatively small sample size that may not adequately capture the opinions of Zambia's rural population. The poll reinforces other anecdotal information that indicates the race between Sata and Vice President Rupiah Banda, the previously presumed front-runner, has tightened. Had the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) fulfilled its legal requirement to conduct continuous voter registration, the swell of younger voters might have given Sata a more convincing lead over Banda. Recent incidents of political violence point to heightened tension and warn of additional isolated incidents of civil unrest. End Summary.

Sata: The (Mis)Leading Candidate?

¶2. (U) On October 30, Zambians will elect a leader to replace President Mwanawasa, who passed away on August 19 after suffering a stroke. Four candidates will compete on polling day, in a first-past-the-post, simple majority system. The aspirants include Vice President and "Acting President" Rupiah Banda (Movement for Multiparty Democracy, MMD), Michael Sata (Patriotic Front, PF), Hakainde Hichilema (United Party for National Development, UPND), and Godfrey Miyanda (Heritage Party, HP). Miyanda gleaned less than two percent of the vote in 2006 and is not considered a contender.

¶3. (SBU) The progress of the three leading candidates has been difficult to gauge in the absence of polling data (three polls presaged the 2006 presidential election; two accurately predicted the outcome). According to the yet-to-be-released results of a poll by the Steadman Group, a Kenyan based market information company, Sata may be leading. Over 42 percent of the pollees said that if elections were held today (October 11-15), they would vote for Sata, compared to 29 percent for Banda and 17 percent for Hichilema. Those polled identified leadership experience and honesty as the two most important characteristics in deciding how to vote.

¶4. (SBU) In response to the question, "If elections were to be held today, which candidate would you vote for?" the Steadman Group received the following responses by province (in percentages):

	Sata	Banda	Hichilema
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Central	33	33	23
Copperbelt	39	25	11
Eastern	52	31	6
Luapula	65	12	3
Lusaka	45	26	14
Northern	60	16	11
Northwestern	23	28	20
Southern	10	33	44
Western	13	37	23

¶5. (SBU) The results, which will be released on October 23, may not be based on a sample size large enough to be statistically significant, nor do they likely capture the opinions of Zambia's rural populations, which form the base of MMD's support. Although Steadman conducted the poll in each of Zambia's nine provinces, this only amounts to about 100 interviews per province--presumably

residents of provincial towns and cities, who may not adequately reflect the views of "rural" voters. It seems most unlikely that Sata's popularity in Eastern Province (Banda's home province) runs at 52 percent, over twenty percentage points above Banda, particularly as Sata campaigning in Eastern Province has been negligible.

¶6. (SBU) Likewise, Sata's perceived popularity in Northwestern Province may be misleading. Without having campaigned in Northwestern before the poll, it is difficult to believe that his popularity could have jumped up from two percent (the percentage of votes that he gleaned in 2006) to 20 percent. However, Sata does enjoy some popularity among miners (many of whom are migrant workers from the Copperbelt region) in Solwezi, the provincial capital. Nevertheless, the Steadman data suggest that Sata has diminished the margin separating him from Banda and will be a strong contender in what appears to be an increasingly tight race.

Banda: The (Un)popular Choice?

¶7. (SBU) Banda continues to enjoy broad but tepid support from an unenthusiastic electorate that credits him and the MMD with a kind of self-evident mandate (based on the 2006 election results) to finish President Mwanawasa's five-year term. Banda also is using government resources (helicopters) to reach rural areas and is benefiting from the editorial bias of state-owned media. He has deployed a cabinetful of campaign operatives to every corner of Zambia. Since his nomination, he has been treating Zambians with populist campaign promises, such as agricultural and fuel subsidies, that through his office he can already begin fulfilling.

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¶8. (U) In 2006, MMD candidate Levy Mwanawasa managed to establish a strong support base across the country. Even in his weakest constituency, Southern Province, he succeeded in capturing 20 percent of the vote:

	2006 Results (candidates' share of provincial votes)		
	Sata	Mwanawasa	Hichilema
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Central	14	59	24
Copperbelt	53	38	7
Eastern	11	43	38
Luapula	60	33	4
Lusaka	49	28	21
Northern	42	49	5
Northwestern	2	68	25
Southern	3	20	73
Western	7	75	12

¶9. (SBU) According to Embassy's calculations, based on 2006 results, Banda can afford to lose popularity in much of the country if he can sweep a strong majority of the votes in Eastern Province, which has half a million voters. The MMD, however, are increasingly concerned about voter turnout, particularly as MMD supporters appear far less enthusiastic than their PF counterparts. Perhaps to encourage voter turnout, the Zambian Government declared October 30 a national holiday on October 22.

Hichilema: Humdrum Appeal

¶10. (SBU) Although Hichilema may have maintained his popularity in Western, Northwestern, and Central Provinces, he appears to have made little headway. Whatever popularity he has managed to win elsewhere is likely to be offset by losses in Eastern Province, where Banda has been campaigning heavily. UPND's separation from the United Democratic Alliance, which in 2006 brought in a great deal of United National Independence Party (UNIP) support in its Eastern Province base, further weakens Hichilema's position in that part of the country.

¶11. (SBU) Despite two years of active campaigning, Hichilema's lackluster, pecuniary image and highbrow platforms have made little impression on a public that acknowledges his integrity, vision, and talent, but considers these to be eclipsed by the young leader's political inexperience. Zambians are simply not energized by his pragmatic and technocratic approach, especially in the face of subsidized fuel and food promises from other candidates. Some Zambians also mistake his introversion for arrogance. Dismissing Hichilema's candidacy entirely, the MMD is more worried about Sata's appeal, particularly given the pulsating atmosphere of the PF's jam-packed urban rallies.

Disenfranchised Voters

¶12. (U) Had the ECZ fulfilled its legal requirement to conduct continuous voter registration since 2005, the swell of new voters easily could have turned the tide in favor of the opposition parties, whose constituencies are dominated by Zambians in their twenties. (The Steadman poll showed that 43 percent of 18-24 year olds preferred Sata, compared to 20 percent for Banda and 19 percent for Hichilema.)

¶13. (SBU) A Dutch diplomat, who is working closely with (and partly funding) the National Democratic Institute (NDI) to conduct a parallel vote count, told poloff on October 22 that an NDI representative had learned that although the ECZ had not performed continuous voter registration, it had added as many as 20,000 names to the voter rolls in recent months, a majority of which are Eastern Province residents. Previously the ECZ had announced the addition of 4,000 names, which it claimed were incorrectly removed in 2006. According to the Dutch diplomat, the NDI rep, however, clarified that the ECZ had removed names and added others, with a net result of 4,000 additional names. If true, it demonstrates yet another instance of ECZ's lack of transparency and sound judgment, and may casts some doubt on its independence and integrity.

Civil Unrest: Possible but Unlikely

¶14. (SBU) According to several press reports, MMD cadres have resorted to violence at MMD rallies in Chipata and Lusaka. Emboff also heard reports of MMD violence at a Banda rally in Solwezi. The hostility, which in each instance was directed at PF supporters, points to the ostensible MMD fear of losing the election to PF. MMD spokesperson Benny Tetamashimba allegedly threatened Eastern Province residents that they would be "beaten up" if they did not

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vote for Banda. In the meantime, PF representatives appear to be bracing themselves to contest the election in the event that Sata does not win. Its rejection of the election results could lead to civil unrest similar to 2006. Hichilema has told emboffs on several occasions that diplomats should not take Zambian peacefulness for granted, as Zambians, he projected, are reaching the ends of their tether. Although full-scale hostility seems unlikely, it is not improbable and Embassy expects additional isolated incidents of violence. (Note: Embassy will convene an EAC to discuss measures to take given the possibility of election/post-election violence.)

Comment

¶15. (SBU) Final 2008 tallies are likely to be much closer than in 2006 (when Mwanawasa won 42 percent, Sata won 29 percent, and Hichilema won 25 percent of the vote) with single-digit margins separating the two leading candidates. Given the tightness of the race, the ECZ will be under inordinate pressure to show transparency and integrity in its management of the elections. In 2001, when Mwanawasa beat UPND candidate Anderson Mazoka by about 35,000 votes, irregularities and problems engendered distrust and suspicion that linger to this day. UPND leadership still maintains that it won the

2001 (and 2006) election. Several instances of MMD on PF violence by riled-up rally participants suggest that the close competition may also be the source of increased tensions between the parties' constituencies.

BOOTH